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University of Dayton

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(Editor's note: Herb Martin will read from his latest book on Paul Laurence Dunbar from 7 to 8 p.m. on Thursday, Feb. 21, at Books & Co., 350 E. Stroop Road in Kettering.)

UD PROFESSOR HOPES LATEST BOOK ON PAUL LAURENCE DUNBAR DEMONSTRATES POET'S GIFT FOR OTHER LITERARY GENRES

DAYTON, Ohio — After a dozen years, hundreds of rolls of microfilm and the occasional “cathartic” trips to the local cemetery, Herbert Woodward Martin can triumphantly return to the grave of his literary icon and exhort: “Now leave me alone!”

Of course, Martin is joking about telling the spirit of Paul Laurence Dunbar to stop pestering him. It is, after all, the former who initiated and nurtured a relationship with the latter that has lasted 30 years.

The latest chapter in that “marriage of souls” has led to the book In His Own Voice: The Dramatic and Other Uncollected Works of Paul Laurence Dunbar ($23, Ohio University Press), a 305-page volume of Dunbar’s previously unpublished and uncollected short stories, essays, poems and dramas. Martin, professor emeritus of English at the University of Dayton, co-edited the book with Ronald Primeau, an English professor at Central Michigan University.

“The main reason for the book’s existence is to show the reader that Dunbar was gifted in a variety of genres — not just dialect poetry,” Martin says. “I want the reader to see that he handled each one with remarkable skill. I hope it persuades critics and historians to assess Dunbar in a larger literary light.”

Martin, a prolific and award-winning poet himself, has earned national acclaim for his readings and portrayal of poet Paul Laurence Dunbar (1872-1906), a native Daytonian and the country’s first African-American poet to achieve national and international fame. Martin is featured on UD’s Web site dedicated to Dunbar at http://www.udayton.edu/~dunbar.

As a young boy, Martin often was told he looked like Dunbar. But it wasn’t until the Alabama native accepted a position as poet-in-residence at UD in 1970 (the city where Dunbar lived and worked) that Martin began to read, teach, perform and research the author’s works.

Aside from “magnifying Dunbar’s literary scope,” Martin believes the book will be teacher-friendly.

“When I got hold of a bibliography of his work, I realized that much of it had either not been published or had not been collected in one volume,” explains the Paul Laurence Dunbar poet laureate for Dayton, Ohio. “I really thought that if I could bring all of this together, it - over -
would be helpful to those instructors who also teach courses on Dunbar.

*In His Own Voice* is a collection of more than 75 works in six genres. Included are the previously unpublished play *Herrick*, a comedy of manners; two one-act plays, largely ignored for a century; a previously unpublished short story, along with six other short stories; 15 essays; 41 poems; six songs; and the text that Dunbar wrote for *Dream Lovers*, a late-19th-century romantic opera.

Martin says *Herrick* is one of the more compelling examples of Dunbar’s ability to move beyond his label as a dialect poet. *Herrick*, which was based on the life of 17th-century poet Robert Herrick, “has no black characters and is dialect-free. He wrote this in standard British English. And it’s very well done.”

Toward the end of his young life, Dunbar was “troubled with the critics for labeling him a dialect poet,” Martin says. “I think he wanted to prove to himself and the world that he could write standard English and write white characters.”

Among other places, Martin’s research took him to Howard University, the Ohio Historical Society, Library of Congress and the New York Public Library in Harlem. But it was in his own backyard that he found one of the volume’s gems — “Ole Conju’in Joe,” a Dunbar short story that no one knew existed until it was unearthed by a librarian working with rare manuscripts at the University of Dayton.

“It was right under our noses,” Martin says. “It was the impetus, really, for me to go looking for the Dunbar plays that had been lost.” Of Dunbar’s four plays, only *Herrick* has been found, with the other three, Martin speculates, “gone forever or languishing in someone’s private library somewhere.”

Henry Louis Gates Jr., director of the W.E.B. Du Bois Institute for Afro-American Research and one of the country’s renowned scholars of African-American studies, wrote the foreword for *In His Own Voice*.

“Martin and Primeau’s edition of Dunbar’s uncollected works allows us to experience an undiscovered Dunbar, a writer of great range, wit, subtlety, and irony,” Gates writes. “It will also lead to a renewed academic and critical analysis, and an even deeper appreciation of Dunbar’s status as the greatest African-American poet before the Harlem Renaissance.”

A profoundly spiritual man, Martin often visits the grave of the poet who died from tuberculosis at the age 33. He talks to Dunbar for “inspiration and guidance, or just to complain about the hundreds of headaches I’ve gotten trying to get this book finished.”

Dunbar is buried in Woodland Cemetery, a lush and hilly landmark that borders east and north of campus. Martin says he’ll soon take the walk to the poet’s grave to let him know that an important chapter in both of their lives has ended.

“I’ll tell him that ‘We did it. We got it finished. Now leave me alone!’” says Martin, his voice weighted with hearty laughter. “And right after I say that, he’ll tell me he has something else for me to do ...”

- 30 -

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